

Seeing, Sensing, Sustaining

| BY LYNN SCARLETT |

SOME MONTHS AGO, reading *The Madonnas of Leningrad* by Debra Dean, one delicious passage halted my reading. “Her distant past is preserved,” wrote Dean. “Moments that occurred . . . years ago reappear, vivid, plump, and perfumed.” This was such a multisensory way of thinking about memories, the past, and even history. I got to pondering how the passage sums up why the tangible manifestations of history are so essential. Preserving artifacts and architecture, old buildings and boats, musical instruments and machinery is important because they make history vivid and plump. Through these things, we experience moments in time, sense their meaning, feel the wonderment of achievement and the angst of tragedy, and better understand the human spirit. **THAT HUMAN SPIRIT** sprang forth as I poked around the basement of Philadelphia’s Mother Bethel AME Church, climbing to its rafters with the present-day pastor. The structure, erected in 1890, is the fourth at this site continuously owned by African Americans since the time of the American Revolution. Its roots trace to Richard Allen, born an enslaved person who bought his freedom at the age of 20. **THE SITE AND ITS SEQUENCE OF BUILDINGS** encapsulate the quest for freedom. Here operated an Underground Railroad. The church hosted the first national convention of African Americans, where ideas of self-reliance and the economic power of boycotting took shape. The church tells these stories. Several years ago, Mother Bethel Church received a Save America’s Treasures grant to repair the roof and secure the bell tower. **THIS YEAR, SAVE AMERICA’S TREASURES REACHES** the end of its first decade, having provided \$278 million for over 1,000 projects to restore and protect buildings and archives of historic significance. California’s Mission San Miguel used grants to repair earthquake damage. A couple years ago, I visited the mission, marveled at the murals painted by Native Americans, and explored the grounds. The site still evokes the imagery, smells, and aura of mission life—giving us a swath of history “vivid, plump, and perfumed.” Fallingwater, Frank Lloyd Wright’s architectural triumph, is at once a work of art and an engineering masterpiece with its cantilevered layers. The stewards of Fallingwater used a Save America’s Treasures grant to structurally strengthen the home and undertake repairs. Ellis Island, historic drawings at Yellowstone, the Murie Ranch home of

20th century conservation pioneers, the historic Midway Island naval facilities, pueblo artifacts in Colorado—these and other icons all received grants to assure that what they tell of America will carry into the future. They give us a legacy vivid and plump with the knowledge and emotion that come from seeing and sensing places and things. **I REMEMBER CLAMBERING** across a slope of talus teeming with pottery shards of an ancestral pueblo village in Canyon de Chelly. Among the shards lay a bone bracelet decorated with designs etched in black. Someone wore this ornament a millennium ago. Who was she? How did she live? **I FELT A SIMILAR INTRIGUE** at Aztec Ruins where we navigated the labyrinthine structure to reach an inner room. There on the windowsill were reed blinds intact for nearly 1,000 years. On the sill was an imprint of a wee child’s hand—a testament to the timelessness of human action. Children then, as with chil-

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dren today, were lured by the temptation of wet adobe or plaster. **HISTORY IS UNVEILED THROUGH** these places. Save America’s Treasures grants help sustain them. Perhaps the Native American philosophy of life as a cycle rather than a timeline is instructive. Historic places, through adaptive use, through sustained links to the present, can create new opportunities for communities to flourish in the future. **THE PRESERVE AMERICA PROGRAM** initiated by the President and First Lady complements Save America’s Treasures by celebrating and facilitating heritage tourism, adaptive reuse, and incorporation of these places into educational experiences. With Save America’s Treasures we preserve historic places, sustaining stories of the past. With Preserve America, we assure that the cycle of life swirls and gathers strands of the past, incorporating them into the present and sustaining them into the future. Together, these programs sustain our many stories of people and places, linking past to present. Together, they give us history “vivid, plump, and perfumed.”

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